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Eighth Comprehensive Evaluation of the GEF

Section 4: Integrated Programs in the GEF

March 2025

Evaluation of GEF Programs in Pacific Small Island Developing States

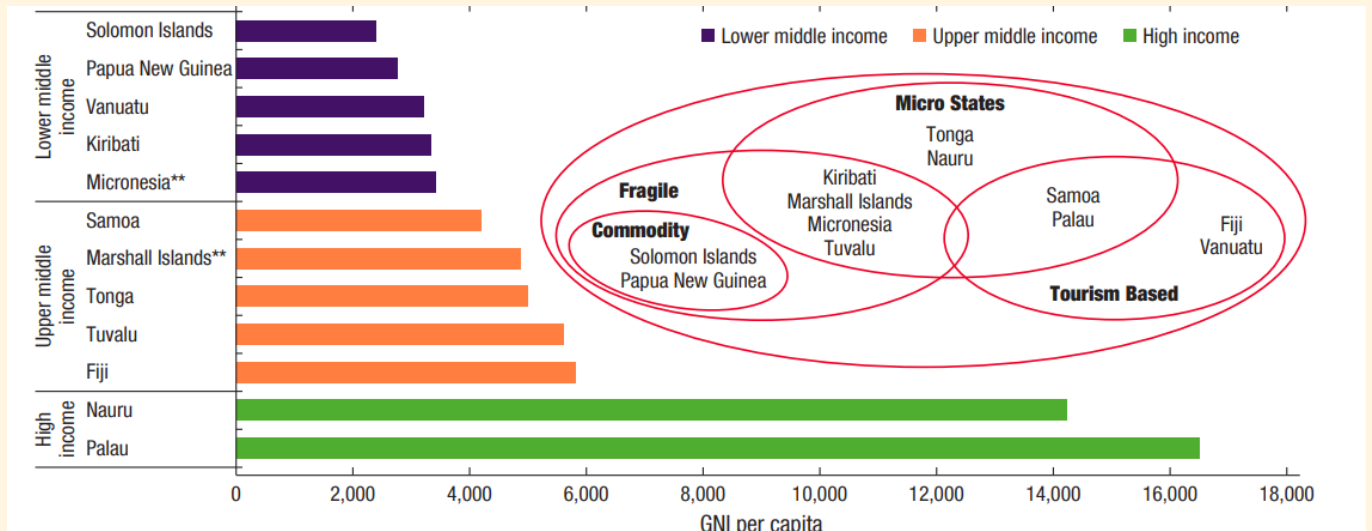
Status: Presented to [GEF Council Meeting 68](#)

The Pacific Small Island Developing States (SIDS) face unique environmental and developmental challenges. These nations are particularly vulnerable to climate change impacts, biodiversity loss, and natural disasters, while also grappling with limited institutional capacity and geographic isolation. From 1991 to 2023, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) has made significant investments in Pacific SIDS, channeling \$528 million into 140 projects. Recognizing the need for a more integrated approach, the GEF shifted its focus in 2008 from standalone projects to programmatic strategies. This shift aims to address the complex, interlinked vulnerabilities these states face in a more holistic and sustainable manner.

This evaluation focused on three key GEF programs in Pacific SIDS and their 19 related child projects (13 completed and 6 ongoing): the Pacific Islands Ridge-to-Reef National Priorities (R2R), Climate Proofing Development in the Pacific (CPDP), and Implementing Sustainable Low and Non-Chemical Development in SIDS (ISLANDS). The evaluation aimed to assess the evolution of GEF's integrated programming in the region, analyze factors influencing

program performance, and identify lessons learned to inform future GEF interventions in SIDS.

Figure 1: Characteristics of Pacific SIDS (\$, 2019)



Note: Includes the 12 countries for which data are available.

Source: Fouad et al. 2021.

KEY FINDINGS

Significant progress has been made in the GEF's programmatic approaches, although some challenges remain. The transition from standalone projects to multifocal and integrated programs has resulted in better alignment with national priorities and improved environmental outcomes. This evolution has facilitated more inclusive and informed interventions. However, persistent obstacles such as project delays, limited institutional capacity, and difficulties in achieving long-term sustainability continue to pose challenges. The programmatic approach has shown both benefits and drawbacks within the unique and challenging context of Pacific SIDS.

GEF programs in Pacific SIDS are strategically aligned with regional priorities, advancing key environmental and development goals. These initiatives effectively support the objectives outlined in the SAMOA Pathway, Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs), Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and various multilateral environmental agreements. For instance, the R2R program promotes ecosystem-based management through ridge-to-reef approaches, which are crucial for protecting these fragile environments. Similarly, the ISLANDS program addresses critical issues in chemical and waste management, which is essential for regions with limited waste disposal infrastructure. However, gaps remain in incorporating broader socio-economic dimensions into environmental programming, as limited capacity within many SIDS constrains the multi-sectoral management required for fully integrated approaches.

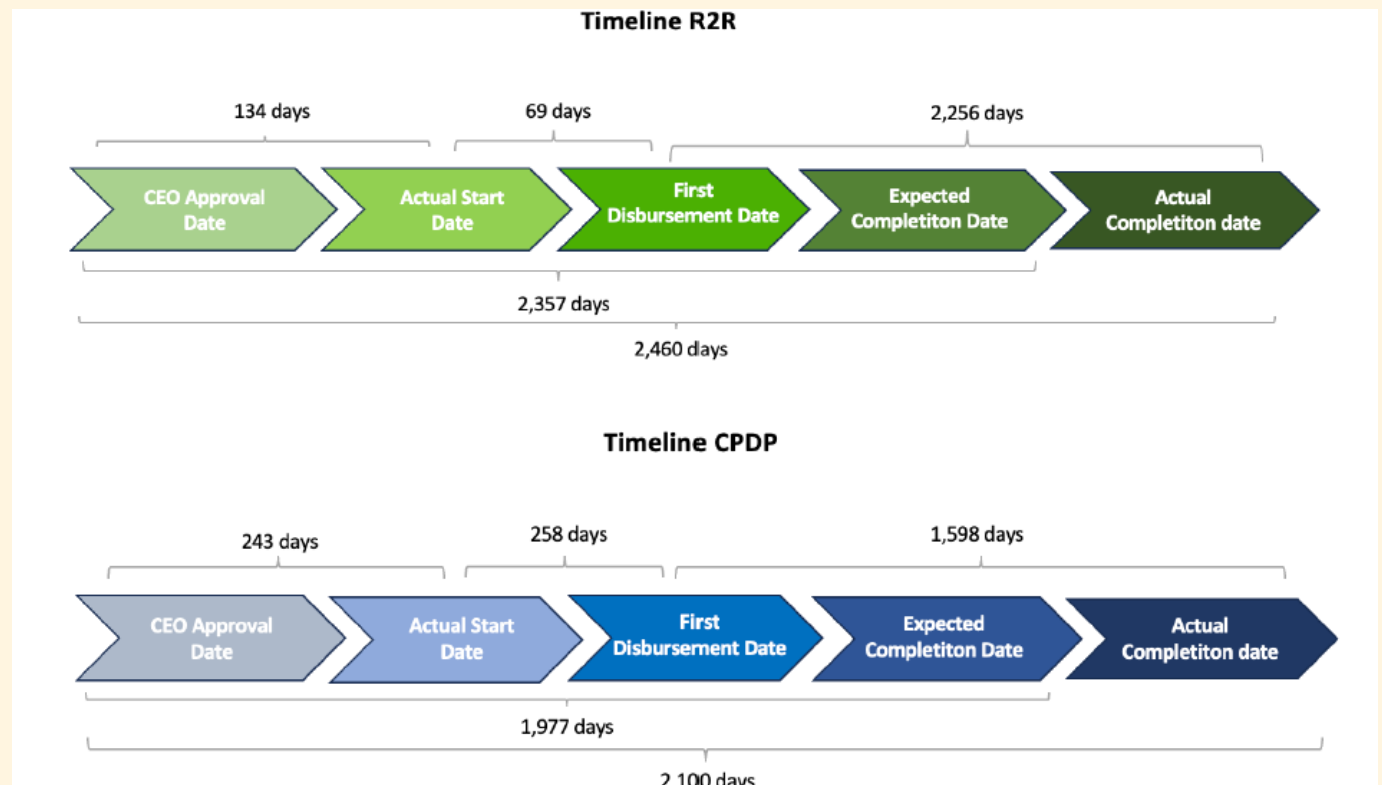
While the objectives and activities of child projects generally align well with program theories of change and other development initiatives, practical challenges arise in the day-to-day execution of programs. Key obstacles

include limited technical capacity within implementing agencies, difficulties in maintaining consistent stakeholder engagement, and complications in coordinating donor activities. Operational fragmentation often leads to duplicated efforts and resource inefficiencies. Institutional barriers persist in establishing unified monitoring systems, maintaining regular inter-agency communication channels, and synchronizing project timelines across different implementing bodies. Additionally, staff turnover in key positions and varying levels of governmental commitment across different jurisdictions impact program continuity and effectiveness.

All three programs faced significant implementation delays, with completion timelines generally exceeding GEF portfolio averages (figure 1).

The R2R program's child projects took an average of 6.7 years (2,460 days) to complete, surpassing the 6-year threshold met by 89 percent of GEF projects. These systemic delays were primarily due to inadequate planning and low institutional capacity. In comparison, 78 percent of full-size projects in the broader GEF portfolio achieved their first disbursement within 549 days of CEO approval, and 57 percent completed their midterm review in less than 1,461 days—benchmarks that Pacific SIDS programs consistently struggled to meet. The overestimation of national capacity in program design led to unrealistic timelines and expectations. Administrative and financial bottlenecks, particularly in staff recruitment and fund transfers, impeded project initiation and management of ongoing operations. Coordination challenges among multiple stakeholders and external shocks like COVID-19, which triggered lockdowns of varying duration across Pacific SIDS between 2020 and 2022, further complicated the situation.

Figure 1: Average timeline of R2R and CPDP program in Pacific SIDS



Source: GEF Portal

The effectiveness of GEF programs in Pacific SIDS varied considerably across different interventions and programs. The R2R program demonstrated significant outcomes, particularly in protected area management, coastal and marine resource management, and water catchment activities. However, 73 percent of its child projects fell short of one or more key targets. The CPDP program achieved notable infrastructure and disaster response outcomes, exemplified by its Vanuatu project, which improved flood management efficiency by reducing pipeline requirements from 30 km to 7 km. Conversely, the ISLANDS program has struggled in its early implementation phase. This is evidenced by its regional child project, where only 7.2 percent of the allocated budget has been spent despite 40

percent of the scheduled time having elapsed. Additionally, weak monitoring and evaluation (M&E) systems made it harder to track progress and adapt strategies. For instance, projects in Fiji and Kiribati under R2R did not adequately capture broader conservation goals, and inconsistent metrics across projects complicated result aggregation.

The GEF in Pacific SIDS have shown significant additional benefits compared to standalone projects. These benefits include enhanced knowledge sharing, capacity building, improved regional coordination, operational flexibility, and the ability to attract diverse stakeholders. For instance, the ISLANDS program facilitated cross-regional learning, while the R2R program enabled coordinated action across 14 countries. These programs effectively leveraged resources and engaged the private sector, as seen in the ISLANDS regional child project's partnerships. Smaller countries with limited institutional capacity particularly benefited from technical support and South-South knowledge transfer. However, these advantages came with operational challenges. The programs faced increased management complexity, extended implementation timeframes, and higher administrative burdens. These challenges were more pronounced in the Pacific SIDS context due to limited human resources, geographic isolation, high travel costs, and technical constraints.

The sustainability of GEF programs in Pacific SIDS faces significant challenges, rooted in low institutional capacity, limited financial mechanisms, and the unique country context. None of the completed child projects evaluated were rated likely of having project outcomes sustained. Barriers included weak institutional capacity, limited financial resources, and unique vulnerabilities of the region. High staff turnover and insufficient funding for maintenance were significant challenges. On the other hand, initiatives that included traditional knowledge and local governance, like

Vanuatu's decentralized approach, showed better potential for lasting outcomes. While regional coordination improved, gaps remain in collaboration between GEF Agencies, national governments, and development partners. Uneven participation of key groups, including youth, indigenous peoples, and the private sector, also limits the programs' reach.

The evaluation identifies opportunities to enhance institutional capacity in Pacific SIDS by carefully considering Agency partnerships. While the current GEF Agencies provide valuable expertise and resources, experiences with national agencies in other regions suggest that expanding partnerships to include qualified Pacific regional organizations could foster sustained institutional capacity and strengthen country ownership. However, such an expansion must be balanced against the increased complexity of managing a broader partnership and ensuring that new Agencies can meet GEF standards and requirements.

Stakeholder involvement is inconsistent, with significant progress in gender mainstreaming but deficiencies in other areas. While gender inclusion has notably advanced, particularly in the design of the ISLANDS program with its updated gender guidelines, the participation of other key local stakeholder groups remains limited. Except for a few instances, youth and the private sector are frequently underrepresented in project activities and decision-making processes. This imbalance in stakeholder engagement restricts the potential for comprehensive and inclusive development outcomes. Additionally, there is a lack of South-South learning opportunities focused on integrating women, youth, indigenous peoples, and the private sector in income-generating activities. This gap hinders the sharing of best practices and innovative approaches to inclusive economic development across the region.

